

April 2015

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Recommended Citation

Schroeder, Tali M. (2015) "Ma'at as a Theme in Ancient Egyptian Tomb Art," *Oglethorpe Journal of Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/ojur/vol5/iss1/1>

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Ma'at as a Theme in Ancient Egyptian Tomb Art

In ancient Egypt, a variety of gods and symbols were used to explain the complex religious rites of the culture. *Ma'at*, the idea of truth, justice and order, is an example of a symbol that was so influential that it was also recognized as a deity.¹ The concept of *ma'at* infiltrated numerous aspects of art during all dynasties and periods. *Ma'at* is particularly ubiquitous in tomb art of individuals in the upper class: officials, pharaohs, and other royals. Tomb art served numerous purposes within the funerary practice of ancient Egyptian society, and *ma'at* is a motif that helps fulfill many of these purposes. *Ma'at* is an important concept that helped create a pleasant living space for the deceased, evoke everyday life, and convey importance of the deceased to the gods. Not only is *ma'at* essential in tomb art, but the goddess herself plays a pivotal role in the Book of the Dead.²

Ennead History

Early Egyptian religion is centered on the ennead, a group of deities that began with the appearance of Re, the sun/creator god, from the primordial ocean. The goddess *Ma'at* is said to be the daughter of Re. *Ma'at* "ordered the daily course of the sun, and was with Ra when he first appeared from Chaos."³ This relationship, according to myth, ensures that the sun makes its journey across the sky every day. *Ma'at* provides the order that allows the sun to interact harmoniously with the sky.⁴ The linkage between Re and *Ma'at* partially explains the significance of *Ma'at* to Egyptian culture. Any goddess that has such a strong connection with the god of both the sun and creation is also highly valued.

Ma'at as an Idea

Ma'at, a symbol of truth, order, and justice, is often represented as a goddess. Ancient Egyptians often depicted important concepts as gods or goddesses due to the religion-centric nature of the society. For example, the deity

¹ Molefi Kete Asante. "Maat and Human Communication: Supporting Identity, Culture, and History Without Global Domination," *Intercultural Communication Studies* (2011) 20, no. 1: 49, *Communication & Mass Media Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 12, 2013).

² Marilyn Stokstad and Michael W. Cothren, *Art History* (Pearson Education, 2014), 61, 77.

³ Egerton Sykes and Alan Kendall, "M," *Who's Who in Non-Classical Mythology* (Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1993): 119, *Literary Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 12, 2013).

⁴ Jared C. Hood, 2009. "The Decalogue and the Egyptian Book of the Dead," *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* (2009): 54, *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 12, 2013).

Thoth often represents the role of a scribe. The scribe was an integral part of Egyptian culture, as he recorded sacred texts and other important documents. For this reason, the scribe is depicted by a deity.⁵ Ma'at is also a blatant counterforce to the concept of *isfet* or disorder.⁶ For this reason, the goddess Ma'at is a distinct contrast to Set, the god of chaos. By nature, the concept of ma'at is the balancing force that restores the order that Set destroys.⁷ This specific interaction is present in many works, including the key work *Ti Watching a Hippopotamus Hunt*. Both Ma'at and Set are manifested in different symbols, but the interaction rarely varies. In nearly all cases, Ma'at is balancing the isfet that Set creates.

Work Illustrating Ma'at

As previously stated, Ma'at is exemplified in *Ti Watching a Hippopotamus Hunt*. The relief depicts Ti, a wealthy government official, watching six men hunt hippopotami. All of the figures are on boats in a river in a papyrus grove. Ti is supervising the hunters as they prepare to capture a hippopotamus. Under the boats, hippopotami, crocodiles, and a variety of fish are present. Above the boats, birds and foxes are shown among the papyrus. The work displays the principle of balance, which is integral to the concept of ma'at. The flora and fauna both above and below Ti and the hunters provide elements of the natural world with humanity in the center. This creates a duality between the feral world (represented by the foxes, fish, hippopotami, and crocodiles) and civilization (predominantly Ti, the hunters to some extent). This duality between wildness and humanity is the most basic form of ma'at. The placement of these natural elements creates a sense of unity in the work.

Manifestations of Ma'at and Set

Both Ma'at and Set are represented in different forms. Both can be represented in their forms as deities or as concepts (Ma'at as order and Set as chaos). In many cases, the image of the goddess Ma'at is manifested in the form of a feather, or a female figure with a white feather headdress. In many cases, ma'at is embodied as an ostrich feather fan, a common good of royalty. Nobles were often buried with the fans to invoke the goddess Ma'at's protection and for comfort in the afterlife.⁸ As a concept, ma'at takes on many more representations. The conceptual form of ma'at is present where order is being restored from a

⁵ Anna Mancini, *Maat Revealed, Philosophy of Justice in Ancient Egypt* (Paris: Buenos Books, 2004), 47.

⁶ *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Maat", accessed November 12, 2013, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/353517/Maat>.

⁷ Stokstad and Cothren, *Art History*, 51.

⁸ Mancini, *Maat Revealed, Philosophy of Justice in Ancient Egypt*, 6.

previous state of chaos. In many works, a ruler is shown destroying an enemy, whether it is a destructive animal or an invading society, which is creating chaos. The removal of the dangerous adversary is viewed as a renewal of the natural balance. For example, in The Palette of Narmer (fig. 1), Narmer is depicted striking an enemy with a mace.⁹ This concept ties Set in directly. Set, a deity of the Egyptian ennead, is widely known as the god of chaos and disorder. As stated in Egyptian myth, Set was responsible for the killing of his brother/ruler of Egypt Osiris. This tale cements Set's role as bringer of disorder. He is portrayed in art as one of any ornery beast, including the "crocodile, bull, pig, wild ass or hippopotamus."¹⁰

Smiting

Ma'at is a typical theme in art portraying rulers of Egypt. Rulers constantly wanted to be regarded as good for the kingdom of Egypt, so they often employed ma'at to exemplify the peace and harmony that they brought. Amenhotep II, the seventh Pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty of Egypt, was buried with a canoe that illustrates this idea. Ma'at (represented in her physical form) watches as Amenhotep II (manifested as the god Montu) smites enemies of Egypt. The figures of Montu (the Egyptian deity of war), are depicted spearing a Syrian, a Nubian, and a Levantine. There is another sphinx (which may also represent the pharaoh) trampling a Libyan.¹¹ On a larger scale, the concept of ma'at is often depicted as a battle scene in which the ruler was victorious. By the same concept as previously stated, the ma'at is restored when an opposing power is dominated. For example, the 14 military campaigns of Thutmose III are documented on the Karnak temple in Luxor (fig. 2). The reliefs depicted on the temple exemplify the image that the pharaoh wanted to convey: one of strength and dedication to his kingdom. By presenting himself as an eliminator of chaos, the ruler cements his image as a strong, able leader.

Offerings to the Gods

Because ma'at had such an influential role in Egyptian religion, it is logical that another display of restoring ma'at is in the presentation of offerings to the gods. The act of appeasing the highest of rulers is, in itself, a renewal of order.

⁹ Stokstad and Cothren, *Art History*, 52.

¹⁰ Joyce Tyldesley, "SETH: THE COMPLEX GOD," *Ancient Egypt Magazine* 13, no. 6 (2013): 32-35, *History Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 12, 2013).

¹¹ Erik Hornung and Betsy M. Bryan, *The Quest for Immortality: Treasures of Ancient Egypt* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2002), 76-79.

Without the contentedness of the gods, disorder would surely arise.¹² In a relief fragment from the 18th Dynasty, Amenhotep I is depicted performing a ritual offering to Osiris (fig. 3). In depicting offerings to the gods, a ruler may wish to convince the gods that he or she cares about pleasing them. The illustration of ma'at by depicting an offering is a common way for the dead to pose their arguments as to why they should be permitted into the afterlife.¹³

Ma'at in Art

As previously stated, ma'at is the concept of balance, order, and truth. Overall, Ancient Egyptian art is indicative of the importance of this concept. The art is generally symmetrical, which is consistent with the description of ma'at as balance. The proportions of each figure are consistent with each other, even though the sizes of the figures may be different due to hieratic scale.¹⁴ This may be due to the use of gridlines, a canonical measurement system that allowed artists to achieve uniformity among themselves and each other. This uniformity creates art that is orderly and consistent with the inherent principles of ma'at.¹⁵

The representation of figures is intended to demonstrate ma'at as well. According to Basson, "the idea was to represent the truth of each thing that was being represented. So the object would be represented in such a way as to display the truth of the object."¹⁶ This concept is illustrated in many works, including *Ti Watching a Hippopotamus Hunt*. The artist depicts Ti in several different angles, his face and lower body in profile, and his torso frontal, traditionally called a "composite pose." The different angles portray a more accurate, or "truthful," depiction of Ti. A full frontal or full profile of Ti would provide less insight as to Ti's appearance than the stylized version because they do not show the features that most accurately represent the human body. While the depiction may not be a naturalistic picture, it captures more information about what the figure truly looks like. Additionally, Griffiths argues that the composite perspective is more

¹² Cindy Ausec, "Maintaining Ma'at: The Iconography of Kingship in New Kingdom Temples," *University of California-Berkeley Office of Resources for International and Area Studies*, 2009, <http://orias.berkeley.edu/summer2009/ausec.pdf>.

¹³ Gerry D. Scott III, *Ancient Egyptian Art at Yale* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Art Gallery, 1986), 83-84.

¹⁴ Danielle Basson, "Egyptian Art and Ma'at," 2012, accessed December 8, 2013. <http://egyptatoxford.wordpress.com/2012/06/16/egyptian-art-and-maat/>.

¹⁵ Archaeological Institute of America, "Full-Frontal Pharaoh and More." *Archaeology* 57, no. 4 (2004): 12. *History Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 8, 2013).

¹⁶ Basson, "Egyptian Art and Ma'at," <http://egyptatoxford.wordpress.com/2012/06/16/egyptian-art-and-maat/>.

aesthetically pleasing than a full frontal or full profile.¹⁷ The composite concept is also illustrated by the water, which is depicted with an aerial view but the profiles of the animals in the water implies a cross-sectional view. The aerial view combines the most important aspects of each viewpoint, the waves on top of the water and the animals in the water, to convey a truthful illustration of the scene.

Ma'at in Tomb Art

Ma'at played a large role in Ancient Egyptian tomb art. The concepts of order, balance, and truth were important ideas for Egyptians in life and death. To some groups, ma'at also implied a form of "intrinsic rightness"¹⁸ or morality that was essential for the deceased to have in order to transition into the afterlife. Images of the goddess and other representations of her were ubiquitous in the tombs of nobles for multiple reasons. The purposes of ma'at in tomb art can be classified in three categories including creation of a pleasant living space, evocation of everyday life, and depiction of importance to the gods.

Ma'at's image was constantly reproduced in tomb art to help reassure the dead that balance in the afterlife would be preserved. Illustrations of the goddess were found in entrances to the burial chambers as a welcoming image (fig. 4). The representation of Ma'at with outstretched wings suggests a protective element, as if the goddess is intended to shield the deceased from anything that may prevent him/her from entering the afterlife. She represented regularity and normalcy in her depictions in tomb art. The goddess was associated with a "comforting certainty that the correct and harmonious order . . . [would] be preserved in the Beyond."¹⁹ The purpose of including Ma'at in these situations was to provide comfort to the deceased.

Though tomb art was intended to give the deceased what he or she needed to transition into the afterlife and "form a point of contact between the realms of the living and the dead," not all of the tomb art's purposes were solely instrumental.²⁰ Because ma'at was such an influential concept, expressions of it in tomb art often seek simply to evoke daily life. Ma'at was an integral part of many aspects of life, including regularity of nature, the cycle of birth and death, and the governance of local provinces. Due to its pervasive nature, ma'at was illustrated in tomb art to remind the dead of his/her previous life. This also illustrates the

¹⁷ Sarah Griffiths, "Old Kingdom Tomb Art." *Ancient Egypt Magazine* 12, no. 2 (2011): 54-56. *History Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 9, 2013).

¹⁸ Whitney Davis, *The Canonical Tradition in Ancient Egyptian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 112.

¹⁹ Hornung and Bryan, *The Quest for Immortality: Treasures of Ancient Egypt*, 37.

²⁰ Sarah Griffiths, "Old Kingdom Tomb Art." *Ancient Egypt Magazine* 12, no. 2 (2011): 52. *History Reference Center*, EBSCOhost (accessed December 9, 2013).

tendency of tomb artists to attempt to create a pleasant living space for the deceased.²¹

As previously noted, ma'at was often invoked to convince the gods that the dead person was notable or important in some way. This concept is prevalent in *Ti Watching a Hippopotamus Hunt*. Ti's prominence in the work is especially recognizable by the difference in his representation and the representations of everything around him. Ti is portrayed in a stylized manner that is coherent with the depictions of important people in Ancient Egyptian art. His body is smooth and seemingly without flaws, while in actuality Ti's body was likely just as flawed as any other human being. This illustration of Ti represents the importance of being remembered as "godly," or above humans. The hunters, on the other hand, are portrayed in a naturalistic manner, as are the other plants and animals in the work. This is an apparent contrast to the "godly" figure of Ti. The hunters and animals are depicted as natural, and thus imperfect, to emphasize Ti's and superiority and importance. The balance created by the stylized depiction of Ti and the naturalistic depiction of the hunters exemplifies ma'at at a conceptual level. The contrast between the two highlights the differences between the ruler (Ti) and the ruled (the hunters) and creates a sense of order that is consistent with ma'at.

Role in Book of the Dead

Ma'at is most often recognized in Ancient Egyptian Books of the Dead, which are scenes that include instructions on how to transition into the afterlife, or Beyond. The books were often painted on papyrus and placed among the wrappings of mummified bodies. The books describe a "last judgment" before the god of embalming, Anubis, and the god of the underworld, Osiris.²² The books often depict the heart of the deceased being weighed against an ostrich feather, representative of ma'at. The goddess Ma'at is sometimes shown directly, as in *Judgment of Hunefer before Osiris* (fig. 5). Ma'at is depicted because the balancing of the heart and the feather represents justice and morality. If the weighing rules in the deceased's favor, he or she is permitted into the afterlife. If the outcome is negative, however, a creature eats the heart and the deceased endures another death.²³

Conclusion

²¹ Hornung and Bryan, *The Quest for Immortality: Treasures of Ancient Egypt*, 180.

²² Stokstad and Cothren, *Art History*, 77.

²³ Hood, "The Decalogue and the Egyptian Book of the Dead," 54.

To conclude, the presence of ma'at is essential to Ancient Egyptian religion, and thus Ancient Egyptian life. As a concept and as a goddess, ma'at was influential particularly in art. Artistic representations of both offer valuable insights into the culture and represent the values of the society. Ma'at can be described as a wide-ranging concept, as illustrated by the numerous works that exemplify it. The representations of ma'at show that it can be illustrated in various ways, including physical images such as an ostrich feather and the goddess herself, or conceptual ways including smiting, offerings to the gods, and general elimination of chaos. The pictures of the goddess Ma'at in tomb art and Books of the Dead demonstrate that the concept is malleable enough to be applied to many facets of Ancient Egyptian life.

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Appendix



1. The Palette of Narmer, Hierakonpolis, 2950 BCE; green schist. The Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Courtesy of Wikimedia commons, public domain.



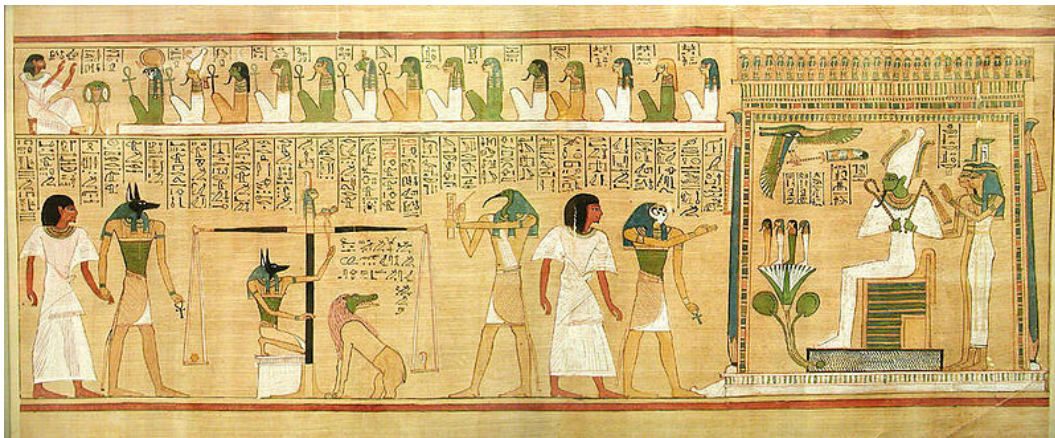
2. Annals of Thutmose III, Karnak Temple, Luxor, 1479-1425 BCE; sandstone. Courtesy of Wikimedia commons, public domain.



3. Stele of Amenhotep I and Ahmose-Nofretary. Thebes, 1390-1352 BCE; limestone. Courtesy of Wikimedia commons, public domain.



4. Scene from tomb of Ramses III, Valley of the Kings. 1295-1186 BCE, painting. Courtesy of Wikimedia commons, public domain.



5. Judgment of Hunefer before Osiris, 1285 BCE; painted papyrus. The British Museum, London. Courtesy of Wikimedia commons, public domain.